MEN WITH ISSUES: EXPLORING JANE AUSTEN’S TREATMENT OF EQUALITY
IN MARRIAGE IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, EMMA, AND PERSUASION

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THESIS: MEN WITH ISSUES: EXPLORING JANE AUSTEN'S TREATMENT OF EQUALITY IN MARRIAGE IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, EMMA, AND PERSUASION.

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen is often lauded for her ability to create relatable, strong, and endearing heroines in her novels and her male characters are written with the same level of talent and virtue. This paper focuses on illustrating Austen’s male characters in the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* as equals to the female characters with her ultimate intention of promoting equality of the sexes, particularly within marriage. Using both socioeconomic and literary history of early nineteenth century England to read Austen’s characters, they become much more realistic, not the one-note caricatures found in romantic novels of the Regency Era. With this deeper reading, Austen’s critique of socioeconomic norms leads to her ultimate moral: marriage should be between equals.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is often associated with great women writers of the turn of the nineteenth century, such as Ann Radcliff and Frances Burney. Critics laud Austen for her ability to create relatable, strong, and endearing heroines in her novels. Daniel Cottom, for example, says that “Jane Austen [is] the author of exquisitely composed domestic dramas” (30). Modern scholars also appreciate Austen’s critical eye towards the pressures placed upon the women of England to conform to specific roles of domesticity and femininity. Sarah Morrison explains that “Most feminist studies have represented Austen as a conscious or unconscious subversive voicing a woman’s frustration at the rigid and sexist social order which enforces women’s subservice and dependence” (337). Jane Austen’s heroines and the women surrounding them show Austen’s wit and brightness of mind, which inspire many scholars to study individual heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennett, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot, to analyze what they represent both within the context of the plot and within the canon of English literature. But what of her male characters? What of Fitzwilliam Darcy, George Knightley, and Frederick Wentworth? Austen is praised for talentedly creating true to life female characters; this acclaim to her talent holds true to her male characters as well. I would like to turn critical attention towards the men of Austen’s novels, specifically to Pride and Prejudice (PP), Emma (E), and Persuasion (P), to argue that Austen wrote all her characters with detail to personhood that she used to craft her lauded female characters in an effort to expose the hardships of societal norms placed on the single people of the peerage in England post-French Revolution, thus elevating Jane Austen not as a famous woman writer about her own sex’s socioeconomic anxiety but as a genius critic analyzing the Regency Era pressures placed upon women and men to use and view marriage solely as a tool.
Jane Austen’s “best-loved novel” (Todd xi) begins with arguably one literature’s most famous quotes: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (PP 1). This quote is often used by scholars to show how unattached women were often expected to throw themselves towards a gentleman of adequate reputation and above adequate income for the sake of family and social responsibilities.

Stopping the excerpt here robs of Austen’s full statement of her opinion of such social contracts: “However little is known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters” (PP 1). Austen is criticizing the blatant disregard towards the feelings of single men. His value is not in who he is as a person, but what he has attached to his name. Virtues, and vices, if the fortune is large enough, are mere footnotes to a single man’s character when those families with “the silliest girls in the country” are attempting to attach the young man to the family (PP 21). With this first sentence taken in full, Austen shows immediately her distaste for this type of attitude and behavior within polite society. For example, Mrs. Bennet only knows that the new neighbor is named Bingley and that he is “A single man of a large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!” (PP 1). Mrs. Bennet does not know Mr. Bingley’s purpose for his stay, how long he will stay, who will stay with him, or for that matter anything other than that he is single with a large income but that is more than good enough information for Mrs. Bennet.

Austen draws attention towards a single man’s selfhood and its disregard by the families of unmarried daughters bringing the issue literally to the front of the novel in the hopes of informing that persons should be accounted for as a whole (i.e., sentiments, emotional maturity, personal needs) and not just as socioeconomic tools for families to exploit.
Jane Austen’s talented writing allows for a multifaceted view of the male characters and the predicaments they face despite these characters acting in the periphery of the novel’s perceived attention primarily to the emotional state of the heroines. Perhaps the most poignant scene showing the feelings of the male characters occurs in *Persuasion* when Captain Wentworth confesses his love to Anne:

> You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. (*P* 191)

Captain Wentworth shows through his letter how mistaken society views male sentimentality. Anne Elliot is not immune from Austen’s critique: she mistakenly assumes that men, and by extension Captain Wentworth, quickly recover from misfired marriage proposals and emotional attachments, largely due to Anne previously receiving three marriage proposals, leading her to this impression. Anne goes so far in underestimating male sentiments as to convince Captain Benwick to stop grieving for his dead fiancée and sober up his sensibilities: “Anne could not but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme, to preach patience and resignation” (*P* 85). She believes Captain Benwick’s overattachment and prolonged sorrow to his recently deceased fiancée shows a lack of masculinity since Anne believes long grieving periods to be a distinction reserved for the female sex as she later explains to Captain Harville within hearing range of Captain Wentworth which prompts Captain Wentworth to write his note previously mentioned. Anne prevents her chances of a happy marriage throughout much of the novel because she inaccurately believes that men cannot hold strong emotions for so long a time as Captain Wentworth has held and still holds towards her. Only by Captain Harville’s and Captain
Wentworth’s direct statements of contradictions towards Anne’s opinion of male sentimentality does she finally perceive Captain Wentworth’s true sentiments.

Following the theme of disregard for a man’s emotions and virtues, the titular character in *Emma* focuses on attaining a proper male partner in marriage for the various females in her vicinity. Emma considers it her life’s goal to unite the single ladies in her neighborhood with eligible bachelors in a noble effort to help those of her sex attain socioeconomic comfort if not stability. Great detail is afforded to the reader in describing each of the eligible men not with assessments of who they are as people or where their feelings lie in reference to a match, but focus on the social rank and property they lay claim to. One of the earliest examples of this occurs when Emma says she knows Mr. Martin’s character by describing his property and income level: “Martin, whom Emma well knew by character, as renting a large farm of Mr. Knightley, and residing in the parish of Donwell” (*E* 19). She regards his estate, or lack thereof, and limited connections as the symbols of his character. Emma would not be guilty of judging Mr. Martin any differently than how her contemporary society would have judged him, though Austen’s critique is plain: this system caused young people of marrying age distress when they wished to marry but were prevented because of class (e.g., Mr. Martin and Harriet Smith). She writes how Mr. Martin’s emotions are ignored by Emma and how Emma convinces Harriet Smith to refuse his marriage proposal because Emma believes Harriet could find a more eligible match in terms of rank and property. Emma later asks Mr. Knightley if “Mr. Martin is not very, very bitterly disappointed” but Mr. Knightley rebuts with “A man cannot be more so” (*E* 73). Juliet McMaster notes that Jane Austen would have been in the perfect social position to accurately view both sides of the socioeconomic barrier:
Class difference was of course a fact of life for Austen, and an acute observation of the fine distinctions between one social level and another was a necessary part of her business as a writer of realistic fiction. [Austen]—as an unmarried daughter of a deceased country clergyman, like Miss Bates—knew what it was to suffer from the class system. (111)

Austen observes accurately the dynamics that were shaped by the English social class system and portrayed how compliance with these societal norms would affect unions created, or prevented, based solely upon them.

To be able to see Austen’s sympathetic treatment of all her characters, women and men, understanding the socioeconomic and historical aspects of the time is instrumental before delving too deeply into the novels themselves. The eighteenth century brought many changes to English society that distinguished it from the countries of continental Europe, and this is reflected in the literature of that period. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature was that “Unlike in certain parts of Europe, no iron curtain of law permanently divided bondman and freeman, trade and land, commoner and noble. Mobility was considerable, eroding traditional ideas of deference” (Porter 49). The concept of a commoner owning land, having a large income, or holding office was not a foreign concept to the English but rather a very domestic one. This chance of upward mobility created a society that was somewhat fluid for the members of the nobility and gentry. A commoner could, with the right talent and connections, elevate himself above the socioeconomic status quo. Although achievable, this rise was rare. Porter contends that: “Spectacular ascent often required the magic wand of patronage, a fortunate marriage, or a chance inheritance” (51). These possibilities of mobility usually only presented themselves to English men, marriage remaining the primary outlet for a woman to rise in social class. Furthermore, peerage was not
for sale in eighteenth-century England, at least not in the traditional sense. A very successful merchant commoner for example, would have almost no hopes of attaining peerage himself. He could however give his daughter a very large dowry to catch the eye of a needy peer’s younger son, marry her off to him, and have the next generation be part of the peerage, provided that the merchant had previously bought “rolling acres … establish[ed] a county family and political pull, and finally assiduously cultivat[ed] friends in high places” (Porter 52). All these concepts do appear within the novels, most prominently with the character of Mr. Bingley who Austen writes: “inherited property to the amount of nearly an hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it” (PP 10).

This circumstance brings attention to the most iconic Georgian English socioeconomic practice: that of primogeniture.

The English aristocracy had the great advantage of being small and stable in numbers. By European standards the English second estate was miniscule, largely because—unlike elsewhere—only eldest sons inherited titles…. Family continuity was the keynote of magnate success; the individual title-holder was the baton-carrier in the relay race of family destiny. (Porter 55-56)

This practice ensured that property would not be divided up between the heirs of the family estate into smaller, less valuable acreage. This placed a giant burden on the peerage in attaining a male heir; a daughter of a peer would most likely have been barred from marrying a commoner if the estate was in danger of being lost to the groom’s family because of a lack of male heir on the peer’s part. In Pride and Prejudice, for example, the entirety of Longbourn is entitled away to the next male heir Mr. Collins, creating Elizabeth and her sisters’ predicament needing to marry for money or be removed from Longbourn. Mr. Bennet cannot secure the property for his
daughters nor for his wife after his death. Great pressure rested upon the eldest son to marry well in rank, money, and land to preserve the family and its good standing. Lady Catherine’s censure of Mr. Darcy’s union to Elizabeth and Emma’s refusal to allow Mr. Knightley to marry at all to secure Donwell abbey for her nephew are examples where primogeniture guides character actions regardless of the sentiments of the man in question. Porter concludes that: “In such ways, were prestigious estates, fabulous riches, and political connections strung together like ropes of pearls” (56).

Additionally, to appreciate Jane Austen’s inclusive attention to both men and women’s societal insecurities during the turn of the nineteenth century, knowledge of the then-current political climate of the country is also required. King George III was losing his sanity and his son stepped in to rule as regent, this time period famously christened as the English Regency:

In November 1810 George III became permanently insane, and shortly afterward the prince became regent under the terms of the Regency Act (1811). In February 1812, when the restrictions of that statute expired, George decided to retain his father’s ministers rather than appoint survivors from among his old Whig friends. (Encyclopaedia Britannica editors “George IV”)

Great economic uncertainty hung on the minds of the English even prior to George III’s madness due in large part to his mishandling of and defeat in the American War for Independence. The loss of the colonies greatly reduced the amount of agricultural imports into England spurring a price increase in not only produce but farmland. Not long after, the war with Napoleon began further increasing the prices of food stuffs and rent. F. M. L. Thompson says of this period that: “There followed twenty-five years during which, despite inflation and war taxes, landowners on the whole enjoyed great prosperity and great opportunities either for liquidating old debts or
making new savings” (213). In this environment of war and inflation, landowners became very wealthy during these crisis years elevating them to become the Great Landowners of England and Ireland. This economic climate also “cemented the partnership between great landowner and the go-ahead farmer to whom he rented out his lands, an alliance which prompted extensive innovation in estate management, stock-breeding, and crop rotations” (Porter 57). Thus, not only would the landowner profit but the leasing farmer could also make a comfortable income from these advances.

Many of these aforementioned landowners did not have noble titles, yet in some situations held greater economic and political sway than those who did. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Woodhouse, and Mr. Knightley are all part of the landed gentry despite none of these men holding a noble title. In contrast, Sir Elliot’s baronetage has been poorly managed and is in the throes of bankruptcy at the start of the novel thus forcing him to leave his estate and tenants. Furthermore, the Napoleonic Wars would allow for some lucky and brave men with no connections to become very wealthy from the spoils of war such as Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft. This would create a very ambitious and competitive environment amongst the upper class when the topic of marriage came up since marrying a wealthy landowner’s son or unattached captain meant economic stability and comfort, while marrying a noble meant social movement and possible aristocratic connections. Naturally, both unmarried men and women from these social circles needed to guard themselves from individuals seeking marriage for money and connections to furnish selfish ends as shown by the characters of George Wickham, William Elliot, and Mrs. Clay.

Finally, Jane Austen’s personal life experiences will also lend a better understanding of her characters. As the daughter of a clergyman, she understood the socioeconomic nuances
between one clergyman from another (e.g., Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton). Austen would also have had the opportunity to observe the pressures that her six brothers had in finding a respectable position in society, steady and livable income, an eligible woman for marriage, and their own emotional fulfillment as shown through Mr. Darcy’s angst between marrying for sentimental desires, such as Elizabeth Bennet, or marrying for socioeconomic reasons, such as Anne de Bourgh (Lady Catherine’s daughter). Likewise, by virtue of her position as a woman and daughter of the middle class, Austen would have been very aware of the ironic necessity for her to exploit her ability to marry into money and connections paralleling Emma Woodhouse’s advice to Harriet Smith to aim high for a husband or Mrs. Bennet’s schemes to throw Jane Bennet into Mr. Bingley’s path. Austen sees that socioeconomic success does not necessarily equate to sentimental fulfillment; two individuals entering a union based solely on socioeconomic values may still leave one or both individual’s emotional needs unmet. Each of her novels present a cavalcade of male and female characters seeking marriage and grants the reader insight to both sex’s sensibilities and socioeconomic responsibilities they face to clarify what Austen believes necessary or extraneous in creating a successful marriage. A great deal of Austen scholarship focuses mainly on the female characters while letting the male characters—along with their emotional needs and the societal obligations required of them—fall by the wayside. This imbalance robs a reader of fully enjoying and appreciating the genius of Austen’s ability to compose iconic male characters but, more importantly, also contradicts her belief in representing marriage between a woman and a man, ideally, as a uniting of equals. Austen skillfully weaves knowledge of the economic and political landscape during the Regency to document and comment on the state of marriage in England as a whole, not just how it pertained solely to women. I hope to illuminate not only these buried emotions and societal demands
present in the minds of the male characters brilliantly written by Jane Austen but her critique and solution to the socioeconomic pressures and sentimental anxieties that men and women both faced at the dawn of the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER 2

FIRST PROPOSAL IMPRESSIONS

The scene in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth refuses Mr. Darcy’s marriage proposal is often misread today as only showing Austen’s early proto-feminist viewpoint during the Regency era: “[L]ike Elizabeth, the novel is utterly unsympathetic and uncompromising throughout the first proposal, refusing to allow the honesty of Darcy’s tortured confession to mitigate the offence given by his insensitivity to her moral and emotional individuality, an insensitivity surely understandable, if not ‘natural and just’” (Christie 151). This interpretation completely blunders Austen’s sympathetic insight into both women and men and her belief that marriage should be between equals. Furthermore, the ending Austen writes would seem to completely contradict Christie’s reading of the novel because Elizabeth not only marries Mr. Darcy but defends and justifies her union to him as wholly appropriate and equal when challenged by Lady Catherine. The character of Elizabeth cannot be both an individual with independence and morals holding independence as of utmost importance while willingly and lovingly entering into a union with the embodiment of masculine dominance. Looking instead at the first marriage proposal not so much as a condemnation of proud Mr. Darcy and as praise for self-governing Elizabeth but as Austen illustrating that men and women should enter a union where they are equals is the more holistic interpretation. As daughter of a vicar, Austen would have had exposure to numerous unions from varied classes allowing her to bring attention to and critique aspects of unions she witnessed as unsuccessful. In the novel itself, Austen provides a handful of couples besides the central one of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth almost as case studies of the marriage dynamic, including that of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet (a negative example) and
Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet (a positive one). The chapter in the novel where Mr. Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth offers the first opportunity to view them as a potential couple and suggests the disastrous effects of a marriage rooted in inequality; each needs to grow in both socioeconomic and emotional means before they can make an appropriate, happy, and equal union. Austen’s nuanced exploration of the emotional and socioeconomic dynamics of Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship will be carried forward to both Emma and Persuasion, with each novel presenting a unique configuration of the marriage dynamic and the process of equalizing it. In doing so, Austen provides a guide to aid individuals in attaining both socioeconomic and emotional success in their unions.

The chapter in question presently begins with Elizabeth attempting to recuperate from the horrible news told to her unknowingly by Colonel Fitzwilliam that Mr. Darcy had orchestrated Mr. Bingley’s removal from Netherfield specifically to prevent Mr. Bingley from proposing marriage to Jane. Mr. Darcy then surprises Elizabeth with a visit when the Collinses are out of the house leaving her with the emotionally fraught task of being a good hostess to the source of her misery. Mr. Darcy blurts out after some moments of awkward silence: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (PP 145). Mr. Darcy openly admits that he is not following his reason but his sentiments. Clara Tuite makes note in her introduction to the novel that: “During the 1790s, when Austen started writing, the novel genre was so strongly identified with the sentimental novel that the categories of novel and sentimental novel are to a large extent mutually definitional in this period” (8). Austen, accordingly, imbues Mr. Darcy in this scene with a large dose of sentimentality and other Romance tropes often seen in contemporary protagonists. Characters such as Ann Radcliffe’s Vincentio di Vivaldi in The Italian or Sir
Walter Scott’s Wilfred of *Ivanhoe* are also led by their sentiments instead of their logic and reasoning in choosing a romantic partner. All three male characters wish to marry the woman of their own sentiments and not a woman who will promote their families’ political machinations. The women of *The Italian* and *Ivanhoe* feel a great sense of honor to be chosen, read condescended to, by the protagonist and often state that she is not worthy of such a splendid union. Mr. Darcy’s statement implying that he previously meditated on the possible consequences of his union to Elizabeth, realized the fallout that would occur should he pursue his heart’s desire, and confirmed to himself that the union would only spell his socioeconomic doom follows this literary pattern. His sensibility wins and he spills forth his love in the presumption that Elizabeth will be touched by his confession because she will understand that he is sacrificing much just like Ellena Rosalba and Lady Rowena were touched in *The Italian* and *Ivanhoe* respectively. In effect, Mr. Darcy decides to ignore his responsibilities as the eldest son who would inherit Pemberley in exchange for following the wants of his heart. If Austen placed special attention to signify to the reader that Mr. Darcy held sentimental traits, then his first proposal should not be considered as wholly unsympathetic as previously interpreted by Christie since Mr. Darcy believed he was following idealized tenets associated with works of romance. Yet Radcliffe’s romances were Gothic and Scott’s were historical; neither quite provides a compatible model for contemporary Mr. Darcy to follow. These other romances do not address the economic realities that peers such as Mr. Darcy had to face, placing Mr. Darcy on a path for failure because he cannot meet both romantic fantasies and real-world responsibilities at the same time.

Elizabeth unflinchingly does not wish to partake in anything related to Mr. Darcy, including his sentiments; she refuses the marriage proposal on the spot. At this point, neither
character would be an appropriate match to the other because Elizabeth does not have any positive sentiments towards Mr. Darcy and Mr. Darcy cannot see the wrongs he has done to Elizabeth. The refusal comes as a great shock to Mr. Darcy and he believes Elizabeth to be wholly ignorant of the comically abundant amount of benefits that she would reap if she would only accept his hand; he assumes Elizabeth would feel honored as the women of Romantic literature tend to be when proposed to by the socioeconomically superior male protagonist. Austen sets up Mr. Darcy with a Romantic story arc of renouncing marriage as a societal responsibility in favor of making a companionate union but he himself completely sabotages it by badgering poor Elizabeth with the reality of her low situation:

He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclinations…. (PP 145)

He is eloquent in expressing his tender feelings to and about Elizabeth, yet he places at least equal if not greater emphasis on the pride of being a Darcy, which gets in the way of a romance ethos. His blunt comments and opinions about his proud social class and wealth reveal that he does not see Elizabeth as his equal and that he is still focused on socioeconomic aspects even though he claims to renounce them. Mr. Darcy cannot separate his pride from his sentiments. Commenting on this very same exhibition of pride, Robert Markely notes:

He is ventriloquizing the pride that is part of his inheritance and that we hear, satirically exaggerated, from his aunt, Lady Catherine. While Darcy’s “principles” motivate him to act generously to his servants and tenants, his “practice” [to Elizabeth and Longbourn
society] exhibits a kind of snobbery, social and economic, that Lady Catherine voices.

Ironically, the flaws in his proposal are made even more glaringly apparent when Mr. Darcy believes he is making himself and his proposal more appealing to Elizabeth. In addressing the reality of socioeconomic expectations and duties, Mr. Darcy has undermined his own attempts at a romantic proposal since class and status were never personally important to other romance protagonists as it is to Mr. Darcy; they simply wished to pursue their sentimental instinct regardless of socioeconomic factors or the societal outcome of the union. Mr. Darcy does not appear to be willing to be an equal of Elizabeth’s so much as he wishes for her to be the solution to a sentimental problem regardless of socioeconomic cost.

Unfortunately, Mr. Darcy seems to be wholly ignorant of the absolute insult he makes in requesting Elizabeth’s hand in marriage in this proud manner while attempting to sound sentimental at the same time. Janet Todd says as much: “In fact Darcy in the early pages is so bad he is almost comic” (155). His upbringing and experiences (especially with Mr. Wickham’s schemes to elope with Miss Darcy, Mr. Darcy’s teenaged sister, for her dowry) has taught him to be guarded with those of lower rank because, to Mr. Darcy, a person of lower rank will only see the socioeconomic benefits tied to a peer and are not concerned about the peer’s emotional wellbeing. This expectation would explain why Mr. Darcy thought that by emphasizing to Elizabeth the material benefits she would gain she would be enticed to accept him and his sentiments; instead, Mr. Darcy is shown to be antagonistic to Elizabeth and her sentiments because of his gentry upbringing and guarded person. Her family and humble connections do not escape antagonism either. His list of offences towards Elizabeth is lengthy. Mr. Darcy orchestrated the removal of Mr. Bingley from the side of Jane Bennet, destroying Jane’s
prospects of financial security and sentimental happiness “ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister” (PP 146). He refused to honor the full amount of the endowment promised to Mr. Wickham after the death of Mr. Darcy’s father: “You have reduced him to his present state of poverty…. You have withheld the advantages, which you must know have been designed for him” (PP 147). At every social gathering and event Mr. Darcy made his opinion clear that the society of Meryton was completely beneath him: “[F]rom the first moment I may almost say of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain for the feelings of others” (PP 148). Finally, he slighted the heroine’s complexion which was her major asset in attracting a husband since she did not have a large dowry to do that for her: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (PP 7). Even if Elizabeth would be enticed by his wealth and accept his hand in marriage, her emotional needs would not be met and Mr. Darcy’s socioeconomic needs would also remain wanting. Austen shows that at this present moment, this union should not take place because they would not enter marriage as equals thus dooming the prospect of a happy union.

As already suggested, Austen disapproved of completely ignoring the socioeconomic responsibilities assigned to both men and women of higher classes because of the very real negative repercussions that would follow a marriage made ignoring said responsibilities. The secondary couples surrounding Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth each show different marriage outcomes that reflect Austen’s views, with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet serving as an example of what would most likely happen after the Romance-based honeymoon period ended in a relationship brought together by ignoring socioeconomic obligations:
Had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (PP 180)

Interestingly, Elizabeth reflects on this reality only after Mr. Darcy has pointed out her and her family’s shortcomings in response to Elizabeth’s refusal to marry. From this passage the reader can gather that Mr. Bennet married Mrs. Bennet for affection and not for socioeconomic advantage. Pleasing and attractive personality traits were present when both were in their youth yet Elizabeth, or rather Austen, does not name the union as one of proper eligibility or between equals. Instead, Austen opts for describing the emotions and sensibilities that brought the parents of Elizabeth together. The absence of any fiscal details speaks to the probability that Mr. Bennet married a woman of inferior station to his own. This is further alluded to when Mrs. Bennet’s family members come calling to Longbourn; neither the narrator nor the characters describe titles or estates belonging to Mrs. Phillips or Mr. Gardiner when introduced. According to Juliet McMaster, who writes on Austen’s attitude towards class: “The quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and humane standards … but like her own temporary snobs, Darcy and Emma … she pays full attention to their social status first” (120-121). The omission of rank in the case of the Phillipses and Gardiners is noteworthy in a novel that marks the titles and prosperity of characters whenever possible: “A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year,” “formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the
honour of knighthood,” and “who lives somewhere near Cheapside” (*PP* 1, 12, 26). Although this fiscal information is more for the benefit of the reader to understand the resources or expectations of a character than to arbitrate if the person is virtuous or villainous, it nevertheless demonstrates that Austen was acutely aware that Regency society placed a great weight upon the socioeconomic health of an individual as much as physical attractiveness when discussing marriage eligibility. This aspect of virtue versus class will appear at the forefront of Austen’s final novel *Persuasion*, though in a different guise, as Captain Wentworth and his fellow sailors not only successfully hold appealing romantic qualities, but also have their feet firmly grounded in the reality of appropriate matches and address their spouses as equals, unlike Mr. Darcy who naively assumes that spouting Romantic sentiments all the while behaving as a superior to the woman and her sentiments guarantees a happy ending.

Mr. Darcy mistakenly believes that romantic sensibilities lead to a successful union but Austen provides Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet, formerly Miss Gardiner, as an example of what occurs when sensibilities are the sole reason for a union in present day Regency England. The Bennets were in danger of losing Longbourn to the distant relation Mr. Collins should the young Mr. Bennet not marry favorably within his sphere and produce a male heir. Despite great pressure to make an appropriate union, Mr. Bennet chose to follow his sentiments and married beneath his station creating the predicament that the Bennets find themselves in at the start of the novel. Furthermore, throughout the novel Mr. Bennet himself does not appear to have any advantageous connections to aid him in the family’s time of crisis, Mr. Gardiner being the only family member called upon for aid and even Mr. Gardiner’s rescue is not from him but from Mr. Darcy as Mrs. Gardiner reveals to Elizabeth: “your uncle was forced to yield, and instead of being allowed to be of use to his niece, was forced to put up with only having the probable credit
of it” *(PP 246)*. Mr. Bennet may have had marital bliss for however long, but he traded away the connections and capital that would later secure him and his family in comfort and station. This is where the “respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown” *(PP 180)*. Mr. Bennet has no resources nor familial or social connections to call upon to alleviate his precarious economic situation or even to help rescue his own daughter Lydia from ruin. Unfortunately, Mr. Bennet’s choice of marriage even limits his prospects of creating new acquaintances and connections with surrounding peers as shown by Mr. Darcy’s and the Bingley sisters’ disdain for the Bennets and their Cheapside connections; they wish to avoid any association with Longbourn and its residents. Roy Porter explains that for an individual like Mr. Bennet to rise even within his own social circle was a herculean task: “Recent research has shown how hard it was to break into landed society at the highest level. It was easy to rise towards the portal of the next status group. Crossing the threshold was more difficult, and required special visas” (50). Mr. Bennet had inadvertently marred any chances of respect, esteem, and confidence from his peers with his socioeconomically inappropriate marriage.

Thus the young and carefree Mr. Bennet committed a serious mistake in lowering his socioeconomic status to marry Mrs. Bennet since it would affect not only his present situation but also the prospects of all his children. Even if Mr. Bennet had produced a male heir, this male Bennet would have still struggled as much as the female Bennets to be accepted into landed society’s higher level since on the maternal side there are no connections of wealth or ancient family ties to property. This hypothetical son would, instead of needing to find an unmarried peer with land as the Bennet daughters, have had the problem of finding a suitable woman with a large dowry: “an alliance of a gentleman’s son with a merchant’s daughter, the landed embracing
the loaded” (Porter 52). Austen’s later works will engage this very issue: the characters of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Mr. Elliot will offer a much closer and nuanced illustration of how young men during the Regency attempted to resolve issues of both social status and economic stability through marriage. These three characters contrast Mr. Bennet greatly because they seem to be acutely aware of both the responsibility placed upon them to not only marry well but to also attempt to break into a higher circle through marriage if possible. Austen presents Mr. Bennet and his avoidable fall from station as a cautionary tale for others who choose to disregard the socioeconomic responsibilities that a man of good breeding and gentle station should follow.

Mr. Bennet did not marry for connections, estate, title, nor funds; he married someone that could sustain the current status if a male heir would be produced, which unfortunately did not occur. Both husband and wife may have loved each other initially but their lost gamble in maintaining their socioeconomic status caused anxiety that eroded away marital felicity. This ill-fated situation parallels the one Mr. Darcy would be in had Elizabeth accepted since Elizabeth was not from the same social circle as Mr. Darcy and she also lacked the large dowry to entice a peer into marriage. At the same time Elizabeth would have done exceptionally well for herself and her present and future family in accepting the hand of Mr. Darcy but she would have surrendered her moral and emotional individuality and perhaps never have had her emotional needs fulfilled. Yet the “issue” of the ending still remains: Elizabeth does marry Mr. Darcy. This union is best understood through the lens of how Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were changed by the union of Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet.

Austen has Elizabeth accept the hand of Mr. Darcy at the end of the novel and superficially a reader could interpret this union as one solely made out love; both characters appear to overlook their societal discrepancies in the name of a romantic union since Mr. Bingley
and Jane, their closest friends, appear to be doing just that. Jane and Mr. Bingley’s union resembles at first the same type of union that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet entered into: one made on sentimental attachment. This reading would challenge the argument put forth previously that Austen believed socioeconomic systems should be respected and followed where possible and reasonable since, to all appearances, the only aspects that have changed are Elizabeth’s and Mr. Darcy’s attitudes towards each other: “her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances” (PP 280). I still believe this ending remains faithful to Austen’s view of sympathizing with both male and female socioeconomic duties all the while championing both equality and affection in marriage. A point aiding this claim but often overlooked is that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth become engaged after Jane and Mr. Bingley are engaged. Jane and Mr. Bingley’s marriage alters quite a bit Elizabeth’s socioeconomic station. Austen even wittily alludes to the type of change that occurred to Elizabeth with her choice of the word “material”: Elizabeth now holds a very materially advantageous relation through Jane’s marriage to the very wealthy Mr. Bingley, whose situation is established near the start of the novel: “Mr. Bingley inherited property to the amount of nearly an hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it” (PP 10). Focusing on the character of Mr. Bingley for a moment, a contemporary reader of Austen’s could surmise that Bingley and his wealth did not come from an estate since he rents out Netherfield. Colonel Fitzwilliam’s commentary about Mr. Bingley also alludes to the societal expectation of Mr. Bingley marrying into permanent status, “What [Mr. Darcy] told me was merely this; that he congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage” (P 142). Furthermore, he is the eldest son yet does not have a title nor are any honorifics mentioned
throughout the novel thus implying that Mr. Bingley is a young man that has risen to a position of possibly acquiring peerage with new money he inherited from his successful businessman father. This would make his marriage with Jane Bennet a union of perfect compliments; her father is a gentleman of the peerage (albeit not wealthy and slightly fallen from grace) and Bingley is, in strict terms, a commoner with a fortune. Juliet McMaster’s analysis of the Bingley and Bennet union supports this view:

Young Charles Bingley is a gentleman of leisure, and already associates with such a prestigious member of gentry as Darcy. But his is new money, “acquired by trade” in the industrial north of England. We see him in the process of buying his way into the gentry. His father “had intended to purchase and estate, but did not live to do it”. Bingley, then, in a leisurely manner, is shopping; by renting Netherfield manor, he is trying out country gentlemanhood. Once he marries Jane, he does buy an estate in a country near Derbyshire; so the “next generation” will be correspondingly a step up in the social hierarchy. (120)

Porter affirms this process: “Peerage-ogling plutocrats had to play a waiting game. First they had to buy rolling acres—and ready-made, consolidated, prestige estates were hardly two-a-penny—establish a county family and political pull, and finally assiduously cultivate friends in high places” (52). Applying this rubric, Mr. Bingley and Jane would mutually benefit each other on socioeconomic terms since Mr. Bingley marries into the landed peerage and Jane marries into money. This same dynamic and situation repeats itself in *Persuasion* with the marriage of common but independently wealthy Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot, daughter of landed but nearly bankrupt Sir Elliot. Both these marriages receive a merry ending in their respective
novels, implying that Austen believed these unions to be socioeconomically appropriate and of equals.

Furthermore, Bingley has approval from his closest friend and social superior: Mr. Darcy. Through events of the novel, Mr. Darcy becomes enlightened that Jane truly loves Bingley for who he is and not for his money:

Darcy was delighted with their engagement; his friend had given the earliest information of it.

“I must ask whether you were surprised?” said Elizabeth.

“Not at all. When I went away, I felt that it would soon happen.”

“That is to say, you had given your permission. I guessed as much.” And though he exclaimed the term, she found that it had been pretty much the case. (PP 283-284)

Mr. Darcy’s comments show that he slowly sees beyond socioeconomic virtue and appreciates virtue of character that can be neither bought, as seen with Lady Catherine’s very abusive and selfish comments about Elizabeth’s station stemming from the crushed plans for an arranged marriage between her daughter and Mr. Darcy, nor inherited, as seen in the vast differences between how each of the Bennets conducts herself (e.g., Lydia versus Elizabeth). Mr. Darcy sees that equality in marriage does not only require equality in wealth and land, but also emotional maturity and sentimental equality to produce a successful union. Mr. Bingley and Jane fit Austen’s view of marriage between equals; both candidates bring something to the union and not one individual will be lowered from their current situation. Furthermore, both Jane and Mr. Bingley do sincerely love each other, suggesting both will be satisfied in socioeconomic as well as emotional needs, and therefore embody the best possible type of marriage according to Austen. This dynamic also reconciles Mr. Darcy’s previous scheme to separate Jane from Mr.
Bingley. Mr. Darcy is an exemplary friend to Bingley even when he originally erroneously counseled Mr. Bingley to avoid Jane and the Bennets because he believed that Mr. Bingley was in danger of a similar trap that almost destroyed Miss Darcy and her fortune. Mr. Darcy wishes to prevent Mr. Bingley from falling for the wiles of a woman who wants his money and not him; Mr. Darcy cares not only for his friend’s financial success but for his friend’s emotional wellbeing, too. Mr. Darcy can now be read as a man of both good sense and well-placed sensibility, contrasting the misplaced pride and tactless commentary that marred the first proposal.

All this is to say that Elizabeth now has elevated herself since the previous proposal and Mr. Darcy has learned to value virtue above station; their union is now one of equals because in what Elizabeth may lack in socioeconomic wealth compared to Mr. Darcy, she balances with emotional maturity. Elizabeth now brings her own equity to a marriage: she holds a greater emotional maturity and richness to her person (which Mr. Darcy now sees the real value) and has affluent connections via her sister Jane and the Bingley in-laws. Elizabeth says as much to Lady Catherine: “In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (PP 272). Elizabeth’s reference to Mr. Darcy as a gentleman also calls attention to the fact that she has changed her opinion of him since her original judgment that he had not behaved as she believed a gentleman should; she has now become sympathetic to Mr. Darcy, his societal necessities, and his actions. The scene with Lady Catherine also shows Elizabeth and the reader that Mr. Darcy was not contriving and imagining the repercussions he described to her that he would suffer if he were to marry someone of lower station, as Lady Catherine is careful to point out:
Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet, interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by every one connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us. (PP 271)

Elizabeth can presently distinguish between Lady Catherine’s vitriol stemming from pride and Mr. Darcy’s blundering pride stemming from contradictory real-life experiences that taught him to be both cautious and brusque as well as devoted to the idea of romantic love. Elizabeth now views a union to Mr. Darcy as an honor to herself that she should be picked by someone who has groomed himself to be of such gentlemanly character. She defends Mr. Darcy’s pride when her father questions Elizabeth’s sentiments for Mr. Darcy: “I love him. Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable” (PP 288). Mr. Darcy has matured a more virtuous sense of pride and Elizabeth has also matured away from her prejudiced first impression; both have grown as individuals. Austen unites these characters only after economical prerequisites have been met as she sees value in fulfilling the societal norms placed on both men and women of the Regency in order to secure a successful and happy union. Austen ends the novel in the best way possible: Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have their socioeconomic needs as single peers met as well as the needs of their romantic hearts’ desires.
CHAPTER 3

PRETENDERS AND SNOBS

Just as in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s views on equality in marriage in *Emma* are often overlooked by critics in favor of praising individual aspects of the novel. *Emma* usually receives praise for either the realistic mundanity of the first two volumes: “in Austen’s hands, the evocation of everyday life becomes something akin to poetry,” or the riveting third volume unveiling all of Highbury’s societal liaisons: “*Emma* reveals Austen not as a thoroughgoing sceptic, but as a social theorist devoted to exploring our encounters with ‘nothing’ in deeply social terms” (Pinch xxi). These evaluations are appropriate because the mundanity and societal liaisons explored within the novel, taken together, raise the topic of what constitutes as an appropriate union. This very same setting of mundanity is what allows Austen to explore the merits of something so common as marriage between young people of different social circles because for the reader to fully be knowledgeable as to who should marry who, the reader needs to be quite intimate with the characters’ everyday routines to be able to know and understand socioeconomic and emotional standing of the characters. In fact, Emma’s unfamiliarity with others’ emotions is the cause of her blunders throughout the novel. Austen illustrates what an appropriate marriage of equals looks like first through the perspective of middle-class Mr. Elton, next through Frank Churchill who was adopted into the gentry, and finally through landed and wealthy Mr. Knightley. Austen introduces each suitor on neutral ground since the narrator does not openly criticize or condemn any one of the men. Emma is the one that becomes shocked or distraught by her suitors’ actions and their attempts at a suitable union for *themselves*. This imbalance is then brought to the reader’s attention and deconstructed by Austen in order to show
the difference between a male suitor acting within societal expectations and norms versus a male suitor acting inappropriately or downright deceivingly in looking for a spouse similar to Mr. Collins’s off-color yet honest search for a wife versus Mr. Wickham’s deplorable behavior in search of money and fun.

Throughout the first volume, Emma believes she is influencing Mr. Elton to marry Harriet yet Mr. Elton takes these attentions as Emma’s own interest in marrying him herself. Mr. Elton receives the honor of being Emma’s first suitor and of being bluntly rejected by her because she believes Mr. Elton to be far below her station to even aspire to marry her. Austen uses the character of Mr. Elton to explore the common assumption that socioeconomic climbing was the best course of action for young people to undertake. Mr. Elton is introduced as excellent husband material, ironically, by Emma: “I think a young man might be very safely recommended to take Mr. Elton as a model. Mr. Elton is good humored, cheerful, obliging, and gentle” (E 28). Emma echoes what society values in a respectable husband and tries to convince Harriet to value this as well. She describes to Harriet all the positive qualities of Mr. Elton and how these qualities ultimately would lead to a happy union for both Mr. Elton and the future Mrs. Elton. Importantly, Emma means to imply that for a woman of Harriet’s socioeconomic status Mr. Elton is a wonderful match, not so much for a peer’s daughter such as herself. Unfortunately for Emma’s carefully laid plans, Mr. Elton aims to find a wife that will elevate his station from someone who works for his income to someone supported by an independent income in the form of a dowry. Emma, “rich, with a comfortable home,” would naturally draw the interest of the local bachelor vicar in his attempts to win her assets especially after “the encouragement [Mr. Elton] received” (E 5, 105). Someone like Harriet would not be an equal match for the social climbing Mr. Elton as Mr. Knightley harshly says:
What are Harriet Smith’s claims, either of birth, nature or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin [the farmer]? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provisions at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as parlour-boarder at a common school. She is not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information. She has been taught nothing useful, and is too young and too simple to have acquired anything herself. At her age she can have no experience, and with her little wit, is not very likely ever to have any that can avail her. She is pretty, and she is good tempered, and that is all. (E 49)

Emma gives little weight to Mr. Knightley’s opinion and then is shocked that Mr. Elton in fact sees Harriet exactly as Mr. Knightley described. Emma is then angered at Mr. Elton’s distressing behavior when he attempts to woo her instead of Harriet. Austen does not condemn Mr. Elton’s actions in aiming for Emma and her wealth, since this was socially expected, but does condemn his hollow pretentions to be at Emma’s level emotionally.

To further differentiate Mr. Elton’s actual trespasses from his attempts to follow societal aspirations, the expectations placed upon the working-gentry need to be explored. Mr. Elton does exactly what a professional young man of his station should be doing during the Regency period: solidifying his position as a peer or strive towards peerage. As Edward Copeland describes:

[T]he “pseudo-gentry”: that is, a group of upper professional families living in the country—clergymen or barristers, for example … allied by kinship and social ties, and by social aspirations as well, to their landed-gentry neighbors, … [were] different in an essential economic condition: they do not themselves possess the power and wealth invested in the ownership of land, but depend upon earned incomes. (128)
Mr. Elton is a member of the clergy and does not currently belong to the landed gentry, although he actively moves amongst Highbury’s illustrious Woodhouse and Knightley social circles. Since Mr. Elton the vicar lacks ownership of land or property, as Copeland suggests, he must resort to working for his income, placing him economically below the inhabitants of Hartfield and Donwell Abbey. Yet he must still keep up gentry appearances if he wishes to maintain his position in life and attract a profitable union. Emma and Mr. Knightley do not need to work for their income as they own the land where their estates are situated. It is understood that Mr. Elton’s ultimate goal would be to become the new owner of Hartfield (after Mr. Woodhouse passes) by marrying Emma, officially granting him the position of landed-gentry and inclusion into the peerage of Highbury. In this situation, Mr. Elton would be the sole party benefiting socioeconomically from the union since Emma would not increase her title, estate, or wealth, to say nothing of the complete lack of emotional attachment from Emma.

Austen brings to the forefront that Mr. Elton is not only moved by possible socioeconomic benefits that Regency culture promoted but also by his precarious dependency on patronage, since he is a clergyman of no background which minimizes his perceived mistreatment of Emma and Harriet. Mr. Elton’s behavior and his unkind reaction to the thought of marrying Harriet Smith becomes much more understandable when viewed with the knowledge that Mr. Elton could fall from his social status quite easily if he does not marry well. This understanding perhaps arises from Austen’s own life: “The Revd George Austen, Jane’s father, was descended from Kent clothiers” (Ross 4). Austen saw and experienced the financial situation that her father and his family were in regarding his dependency on patronage and good connections within upper society enabling her greater insight into the delicate and precarious socioeconomic situation that a young clergyman would find himself. The clergymen Mr. Elton
and Mr. Collins both are characters that appear to have the same roles, disastrously wooing the heroine in their respective novels, yet both characters have vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds, illustrating Austen’s intimate understanding of the subtle differences from one clergyman to another. Mr. Elton has no rich family member to speak of nor an estate entailed to him on the passing of the current occupant. Mr. Collins, also a member of the pseudo-gentry, does have an estate entailed to him thus elevating him a notch higher and therefore has much more freedom to marry for personal interest (directed by his patroness) rather than socioeconomic necessity as Mr. Elton must. Furthermore, Mr. Collins offers to marry one of the Bennet daughters in an act of amity since the Bennets are on the brink of becoming just like the Bateses. In this regard, Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton are not from the same social caste regardless of their shared profession.

Examples of the working gentry falling from grace are present within the actual text of the novel. The reader has only to turn towards the Bateses to see the possible misfortune that may befall an individual that does not marry favorably. Miss Bates, daughter of a former vicar of Highbury, now lives in a very humble abode with her mother and only one servant without prospects of improvement. Copeland’s elaboration on the vulnerability of the pseudo-gentry applies to these two instances in *Emma*:

The consequence of [socioeconomic] aspirations . . . presents this class with a twofold economic burden: first, of course, the need to pay for the necessary markers of their genteel appearance; and, second, the need to soften the inherent weakness of their economic position—with the loss of the breadwinner, there is a loss of his income as well. (128)
Mr. Elton seems sharply aware of this common predicament amongst his own social class and the ticking clock that was his economic future. Mr. Knightley affirms this when he notes of Mr. Elton that: “He knows the value of a good income as well as anybody. I have heard him speak with great animation of a large family of young ladies that his sisters are intimate with, who have all twenty thousand pounds apiece” (E 53). Emma’s desire for Mr. Elton to marry Harriet Smith seems socioeconomically irresponsible and naïve since Harriet has no money or connections to speak of and her parentage is an unknown factor. Mr. Elton does not appear to be as naïve as Emma to the realities that face pseudo-gentry individuals such as himself. If he does not act accordingly, his future will not be very different from the Bateses who, before Mr. Bates’ death, most likely inhabited the same vicarage that Mr. Elton currently resides. He does not have an entailed estate to look forward to as Mr. Collins does. His ambition to marry well or wealthy and his tactic of using his cheerful and obliging good humor to prevent such a personal catastrophe appears sensible for Mr. Elton since he cannot entice a profitable union otherwise. He uses his looks and charms to secure a socioeconomically successful marriage, not unlike some women of the time (e.g., Mrs. Bennet).

Yet on the actual appropriateness and equality of the union of commoner Mr. Elton to Emma Woodhouse of Hartfield, Emma summarizes succinctly: “His professions and his proposals did him no service. She thought nothing of his attachment, and was insulted by his hopes. He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love” (E 107). Emma does not see Mr. Elton as anywhere near her socioeconomic station and furthermore finds his attempts at elevation through his statements of love insulting. Emma would receive no socioeconomic benefit from Mr. Elton; all material benefits would accrue to Mr. Elton. He would marry into the second largest estate in Highbury making the pseudo-gentry
vicar a wealthy peer while not having any similar connections, titles, or funds to offer a woman of peerage. Mr. Elton thus relied, most unflatteringly in Emma’s eyes, on his charm to woo her into marriage. Furthermore, he would most likely take control of the estate and the income as would have been common during this period, all the while handwaving away Emma’s preferences on the management of Hartfield since Mr. Elton, according to Emma, does not love her. Emma says that this is the reason for her remaining single: “without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield” (E 68). Emma does not wish to marry because not only are all of her socioeconomic needs currently met, she also enjoys a level of autonomy that was not common for women. The only reason Emma will marry is for love, yet she says that she receives much love and attention from her father, the Knightley brother-in-laws, her sister, her nieces and nephews, and many more inhabitants of Highbury all while retaining her autonomy. She does not love Mr. Elton, or rather does not wish to submit to Mr. Elton, and does not need his love to satisfy her emotionally. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson argues that Emma is already in love with Mr. Knightley, although subconsciously at this point in the novel, therefore Emma cannot imagine herself submitted or acquiescing to any other man: “Being in love, Emma, at least intuitively, cannot interpret Elton’s conduct as love: it makes no sense—and it is nonsense, a game to win a rich wife” (155). A union between Emma and Mr. Elton would cause her to surrender autonomy and remain unhappy while Mr. Elton would gain social esteem and financial felicity. This marriage would not be between equals because both parties would not benefit equally socioeconomically nor would it bring emotional fulfillment for Emma.
Contrasting Mr. Elton is Frank Churchill who to all Highbury, and particularly at Randalls, is believed to be a perfect match for Emma in both socioeconomic terms and emotional fulfillment. In the second volume, when Emma is first introduced to Frank Churchill, Emma “felt immediately that she should like him” (E 149). This liking remains different than the initial affinity Emma had for Mr. Elton as she favored Mr. Elton for Harriet and not for her own acquaintance. Although Frank Churchill also presents a charming personality as did Mr. Elton, Frank appears to be much more genuine in his high spirits according to Emma. This first impression of genuineness unfortunately obfuscates his real sentiments, which he holds further down. Frank is adopted by the wealthy Churchills, placing him within the same class as Emma. Frank absolutely does not need to work for his income, unlike Mr. Elton, and would most likely inherit the Churchill’s estate on their passing away. Austen, ever attentive to economics, includes clues to Frank’s financial power most notably when he purchases a pianoforte for Jane Fairfax seemingly on a whim: “The instrument’s pedigree, combined with its size, signals extravagance mismatched not merely with the Bates’ tiny cottage but with all the spending habits in Highbury” (Barchas 127). Yet despite Frank Churchill’s socioeconomic virtues, he is not a suitable equal for Emma in marriage. As previously discussed, Emma is mistress of her estate. As such, she would most likely be the one to manage the financial affairs of Hartfield. Hartfield’s stately generosity to its neighbors the Bateses (“My dear papa, I sent the whole hind quarter [of pork]” (E 135)) implies that Emma has a very financially sound and sensible head allowing her to dispense such gifts without affecting her own comfort. On the other hand, Frank relies on the patronage and good will of his aunt all the while making showy displays of wealth such as the purchase of the pianoforte. Frank needs to not anger and alienate his aunt who controls both his income and his possible inheritance. Mrs. Churchill appears to be very
unsupportive of Frank visiting his father, Mr. Weston, since Mr. Weston worked for his income and therefore would not be of the same social class as the Churchills: “The English social ladder was indeed precisely graded” as Roy Porter notes (49). This precarious and delicate class situation is the reason that Frank does not marry or make public his engagement to Jane Fairfax until after Mrs. Churchill’s death, Mr. Churchill being much more open to Frank’s union to an orphan with no socioeconomic prospects. Emma may marry, or refuse, whoever she wishes without fear of economic repercussions tied to her union as opposed to Frank who must keep up an appearance that he has no interest or connection to Jane Fairfax as a way of preserving his socioeconomic health. Frank Churchill is not on equal grounds with Emma when socioeconomic stability is the measurement: “Enscombe could not make him happy, and that whenever he were attached, he would willingly give up much of wealth to be allowed an early establishment” (E 161). Furthermore, on the aspect of personal and emotional equality, Frank brings no growth to Emma in their society let alone their union. Emma recovers too quickly from his removal from Highbury for her to have been seriously attached: “When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love” (E 206-207). In fact, Frank Churchill’s influence is the reason for many of Emma’s more insensitive comments culminating with Emma’s behavior on Box Hill: “Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!—How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued!” (E 296). Frank Churchill brings Emma’s normally gentle and amiable nature down to a more frank and curt one; he does not bring emotional value or virtue to a possible union between them.

During the same Box Hill outing, Frank comments on the true nature of an individual being hidden from public view thus creating inequality when marriages are formed from public
acquaintances: “for as to any real knowledge of a person’s disposition that Bath, or any public place, can give—it is all nothing; there can be no knowledge. It is only by seeing women in their own homes, among their own set, just as they are, that you can form any just judgment. Short of that, it is all guess and luck” (E 293). Of course, this comment is just as valid for the men of the novel. Emma and Frank only know each other through public gatherings where Frank almost always is concealing his inner sentiments about Jane Fairfax. Frank’s request for Emma to find him a suitable wife also illustrates that Frank and Emma are not a suitable match: “Well, I have so little confidence in my own judgment, that whenever I marry, I hope somebody will choose my wife for me. Will you?” (E 293). Frank is ironically asking the worst person possible to find him a suitable wife since Emma not only was blind to Harriet’s, Mr. Elton’s, Mr. Martin’s, Frank Churchill’s, Jane Fairfax’s, and Mr. Knightley’s true sentiments, but she is also blind to her own true feelings for Mr. Knightley. Emotional blindness, or more bluntly, emotional insensitivity, will undoubtedly cause trouble within a union. Jane Fairfax says as much: “I would be understood to mean, that it can be only weak, irresolute characters, (whose happiness must be always at the mercy of chance,) who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression for ever” (E 293). Jane, in this particular case refers to unions made quickly based upon socioeconomic and emotional assets instead of upon the individuals themselves entering the union. The individual’s material wealth or lively disposition, or lack thereof, my not always be present for the length of the union and believing that these changeable objects are the elements of a happy long-term union is silly as seen from the state of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage in Pride and Prejudice. Austen through Jane Fairfax condemns individuals that childishy believe mutable objects and situations are the sole determining factor for permanent happiness in marriage. Frank’s socioeconomic situation is most certainly mutable
and his impulsive nature would not be a suitable match for Emma who has known both socioeconomic and emotional stability all her life: “[Emma] had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (E 5), to say nothing of his current unsuitability for a union with reserved and principled Jane Fairfax.

With both socioeconomic and emotional equality and stability in mind, the only suitable match for Emma is Mr. George Knightley. Mr. Knightley originally is not seen as a suitor by Emma because his marriage means John Knightley’s son would lose the estate and wealth needed to securely remain amongst the peerage: “younger sons got a relatively meagre consolation prize of money and a leg-up into a profession” (Porter 56). Primogenitor rights rises to the forefront as the main reason for Emma wanting Mr. George Knightley to remain a bachelor and her continued overlooking of her own sentiments: “Mr. Knightley must not marry!—You would not have little Henry cut out from Downell?—Oh! no, no. Henry must have Donwell. I cannot at all consent to Mr. Knightley’s marrying” (E 176). The estate in question is Hartfield’s neighbor and counterpart, Downwell Abbey. Although the estates may not be exactly equal in magnitude and worth, both are large and splendid. John Knightley as second son would not inherit stately Donwell Abbey and would have been sent off to learn a profession to have his own way of producing income thus John and Isabella have no estate of their own since Emma will keep Hartfield on Mr. Woodhouse’s death and Mr. George Knightley inherited Donwell Abbey as firstborn. John and Isabella’s children do have the probability of inheriting Hartfield if Emma does not marry at all, an unlikely prospect considering she is twenty-one, or if Mr. Knightley does not marry which is much more likely since he is in his late thirties and has not motioned any interest in a particular woman. Emma continues placing other priorities first thus she cannot see the true sentiments of others and her own; she would rather Mr. Knightley never
marry to benefit Isabella’s eldest son instead of wishing for a joyful marriage for her friend and neighbor. Emma currently is not necessarily a good marital match for anyone because she continues placing her pet schemes first before the sentimental needs and health of those around her. She appears to act no different than Lady Catherine who wished to organize and plan the lives all those around her believing herself superior to all others in such matters. Emma may not be as ruthless with her matchmaking, but nevertheless she is doing the same thing as Lady Catherine, especially in regards to the neighborhood vicar. Both Emma and Lady Catherine attempt to create a union that they believe is socioeconomically appropriate for Mr. Elton and Mr. Collins respectively, individuals from lower degrees than themselves. For Emma to become an appropriate match herself, she needs to grow emotionally since she is already at the top economically which mirrors the problem that Mr. Darcy had during his first proposal to Elizabeth.

In terms of emotional equality, Emma grows throughout the novel to be an equal for Mr. Knightley as does Mr. Knightley grow to understand Emma’s emotions. The most visible growth that both characters show is in their opinion of Mr. Martin and Harriet. Initially, Emma believes Harriet capable of attaining a better socioeconomic union than one to Mr. Martin and Mr. Knightley believes Harriet marrying someone of Mr. Martin’s socioeconomic level as very advantageous to her. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley originally could not agree as to what a marriage of equality looks like. This in turn would most certainly cause resentment and strife within the union if either party cannot have their expectations of marriage met. Mr. Knightley says early in the novel that he is her superior; a statement that, whether right or wrong, instantly makes their union at this point in the novel one of inequality. Emma responds to his claims of superiority with wit of her own: “‘A material difference then,’ she replied—‘and no doubt you
were much my superior in judgement at that period of our lives; but does not the lapse of one-and-twenty years bring our understandings a good deal nearer?” with Mr. Knightley responding: “Yes a good deal nearer” (*E* 79). Mr. Knightley, and Austen, relay the message that Emma is not as mature as she believes herself to be when it comes to understanding the inner sentiments of others, in this case those of Harriet and Mr. Martin. Harriet and Mr. Martin are truly sentimentally attached to each other and Mr. Martin’s socioeconomic station in life would allow for Harriet to attain socioeconomic stability of her own: a successful union of equals. On the other hand, Mr. Knightley’s belief that he is Emma’s superior means that she is not his equal emotionally as much as Frank Churchill is not financially equal to Emma. If Emma cannot see beyond her own self to the emotional needs of others and how to meet them, she is no equal to Mr. Knightley who is consistently shown as thinking of others; for example, Mr. Knightley lends his carriage to the Bateses, “for Mr. Knightley’s carriage had brought, and was to take them home again”; and he prepared amusement at Donwell Abbey for Mr. Woodhouse while others picked strawberries: “Mr. Knightley had done all in his power for Mr. Woodhouse’s entertainment. Mr. Woodhouse had been exceedingly well amused” (*E* 175, 284). Most importantly, Mr. Knightley will not remove Emma from Hartfield while Mr. Woodhouse lives there and instead “he should be received at Hartfield; that so long as her father’s happiness—in other words his life—required Hartfield to continue her home, it should be his likewise” (*E* 352). Only after receiving Mr. Knightley’s reprimand on Box Hill does Emma begin to see the true consequences of her attempts at matchmaking and the harm of her uncensored witticisms. Emma begins to think of others and herself with a more perfect and complete understanding. Both characters verbalize their near equal levels of understanding about others towards the end of the novel specifically after the engagement of Harriet and Mr. Martin: “As she [Emma]
became acquainted with Robert Martin, who was now introduced at Hartfield, she fully acknowledged in him all the appearance of sense and worth” (E 379). Mr. Knightley as well comments that Harriet is much nobler of heart than he had given her credit. Mr. Knightley aided Emma in recognizing others’ sentimental standing as clearly as she could see socioeconomic standing.

Yet if Mr. Knightley was perfect, he would never be an equal and appropriate match to the flawed heroine since he would then be lowering himself to her level, and furthermore the character of Mr. Knightley would not read as a believable person in a novel focused on everyday realism. Austen is aware of this since she does write Mr. Knightley with character flaws to which Gene Koppel brings attention:

There are several reasons why, in spite of Mr. Knightley’s near-perfection, most readers accept him as “real”. The first is his overly direct, at times rough, manner (as when he orders Miss Bates to get Jane away from the Cole’s piano). Next, although the narrative frequently puts us in Mr. Knightley’s presence, we are seldom informed of his inner thoughts…. And the less closely a reader can study a perfect character, the easier it is for him to accept that character’s reality. Finally, Mr. Knightley is (as almost every commentator on Emma observed) jealous of Frank Churchill…. (29-30)

Mr. Knightley’s flaws create a realistic picture of a man who has many positive virtues. Austen reserves this near-perfect man as the perfectly equal match for a heroine that has lived a near-perfect life; the last line Austen writes predicts an ideal marriage: “the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union” (E 381). And of course both Mr. Knightley and Emma would make a perfect union in terms of economics; the two largest estates and wealthiest individuals would consolidate their capital into
an even larger legacy for their children. This contrasts the alternative option of the estates remaining separate had Emma married Mr. Elton or Frank Churchill and likewise if Mr. Knightley had married Jane Fairfax. The landed and wealthy peers of Highbury thus prevent a dilution of both familial ties and financial prosperity, a great fear of both Lady Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice* and Sir Elliot of *Persuasion*. Still, Austen does not rest on granting Emma and Mr. Knightley a perfect socioeconomic and emotional union; she also grants all the rejected suitors unions befitting each one in their capacity by the end of the novel. Frank Churchill, adopted into the gentry and originally a son to a struggling merchant, marries Jane Fairfax, an orphaned young woman raised amongst the family of a wealthy captain. Mr. Elton the social climber marries a wealthy merchant’s daughter Augusta Hawkins, who fancies herself an equal to Emma Woodhouse. Just as Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet grew to be each other’s equal, each suitor in *Emma* marries the perfect woman that equals their socioeconomic station and emotional sophistication.
CHAPTER 4

CAPTAINS OF SENTIMENTALITY

Jane Austen’s last completed novel *Persuasion* places equality in marriage as the primary theme of the novel, making it somewhat unique, thematically speaking. Austen does discuss equality in marriage and depicts both successful and unsuccessful unions within her previous novels, but *Pride and Prejudice* firmly remains a character drama focused on its titular themes and *Emma* likewise stands as a slice-of-life narrative centered on the growth of its titular heroine. If the title of each novel frames for the reader what the primary theme of the text will be, Arthur E. Walzer’s question about *Persuasion* is apt: “What did Jane Austen intend by the title of her last novel?” (690). Although Walzer focuses more on rhetoric itself and its changing style during Austen’s time and her use of “new” rhetoric, the conclusion he arrives at is nevertheless relevant here: “the most direct answers to these questions lie in the rhetorical theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth century … the understanding of persuasion underwent significant change in the work of Francis Bacon and the ‘new’ rhetorics of George Campbell and Hugh Blair” (690). *Persuasion* stands as Austen’s written commentary, presented as a novel, on marriage and how to produce successful unions where both parties would meet their socioeconomic and sentimental necessities. Austen uses persuasive writing to convince, please, and move the novel’s audience into holding her universal truth that marriage should be between equals like that of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, Mr. Knightley and Emma, and *Persuasion*’s own example of Captain Wentworth and Anne.

*Persuasion* at first may be read as Austen calling attention to the advantages and drawbacks of individual and social persuasion such as when Lady Russell persuaded Anne Elliot,
the novel’s heroine, to call off her engagement to Captain Wentworth for socioeconomic reasons even though Anne held strong sentimental attachment to him: “She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing” (P 28), but the title also refers to Austen’s attempt to persuade her readers to regard equality as of utmost importance in a healthy and happy marriage. Austen’s novels show a high degree of awareness of the social inequality that existed between men and women but also a willingness to identify marriage as a space where these social limitations can be challenged. Since the marriage space would have been a private sphere, Austen sees matrimony as an opportunity for man and woman to flourish as equals in a private union set apart from external societal norms, which Roy Porter defines as follows:

Within the professional and landed classes, the roles of wife and mother began to evolve during the century. Not that the ultimate male-female power imbalance was redressed: in 1800 women were still as disadvantaged as ever in law and locked out of public office. But attitudes towards marriage were changing in ways which curbed the power of parents over their offspring’s choice and gave more positive roles to wives as mothers within the domestic family. Moralists and preachers always deplored the marriage de convenance, and gradually more people began to accept the superior claims of personal choice of mate, affection, and even love. (28)

The implication here is that marrying for sentimental reasons instead of socioeconomic reasons was becoming much more accepted within society. As liberating as this may be, Austen warns through her previous novels that unions made solely for sentimental reasons with no financial grounding tend to become strained by the pressures of managing an income and societal responsibilities still attached to the gentry class. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are one such example where parental and societal roadblocks may not have been present per se, but their lack of
financial planning caused friction within the marriage culminating in the possible ousting of the Bennets from Longbourn.

The first marriage inviting scrutiny within *Persuasion* occurs in the first chapter even before the heroine Anne Elliot is introduced by the narrator: “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character; vanity of person and of situation. Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable … though not the very happiest being in the world herself,” (*P* 10). The reader may find it odd that Anne does not become the narrator’s focus until well after introducing all the other Elliots (and the Russells), though this may be a way of Austen showing how passive and in the background Anne is at the start of the novel (for reference, *Emma* begins with the words: “Emma Woodhouse” (*E* 5)). A stronger interpretation could be that Austen places the Elliot’s marriage at the front of the novel alerting the reader to her ultimate proposition of evaluating different types of unions; the beginning acts as a thesis, so to speak, for her novel’s overarching theme. In this light, Sir Walter serves as an example of a spouse too focused on himself and his socioeconomic health, or least the appearance of health. He focuses on his well-being and appearance both in the socioeconomic sense and in the physical sense. He is not given redeeming qualities in his own introduction, and throughout the rest of the novel appears to be a caricature of the socioeconomically obsessed peerage that believes virtue and high rank are synonyms. Lady Elliot, on the other hand appears to be a woman of good sense who married Sir Walter because of a youthful infatuation. Neither character presents a positive example of marriage because although the union may have been appropriate socioeconomically (the Baronetage states Elizabeth Elliot nee Stevenson was the daughter of an esquire), the union did not bring emotional growth, let alone permanent economic stability as did, for example, Emma’s and Mr. Knightley’s union. This is not to say that the
Elliot’s marriage was a disaster. The narrator notes that although Lady Elliot was not the happiest wife, she did enjoy the company of her friends and children. Sir Walter does add more precise information about Lady Elliot’s death in his prized Baronetage: “inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife” (P 9), perhaps implying that he held enough affection to include more information about his wife in his book. Still, scribbling down the death date as the only means of remembering his spouse remains a poignant example of the romance and sentimental attachment leaving the marriage after the initial infatuation has deteriorated. Sir Walter did not continue the moderation that Lady Elliot practiced to prevent overconsumption: “with her had died all such right-mindedness, and from that period he had been constantly exceeding it” (P 14). The virtues of one spouse did not influence the other implying that a union did not exist so much as a cohabitation of two people sharing an estate, in other words, Sir Elliot and Lady Elliot shared no private sphere where both husband and wife equally advised and managed their life together. Sir Walter engaged himself with his diversions while Lady Elliot busied herself with hers, eventually resulting in the novel’s opening predicament of the Elliots needing to retrench due to financial mismanagement.

The Crofts are also introduced near the very beginning of the novel and stand as a contrast to the Elliots’ marriage. Austen presents the Crofts as a positive example of marriage where the man and woman are equals, conveying even a positive first impression towards the Elliots:

This meeting of the two parties proved highly satisfactory, and decided the whole business at once. Each lady was previously well disposed for an agreement, and saw nothing, therefore, but good manners in the other; and, with regard to the gentlemen,
there was such a hearty good humour, such an open, trusting liberality on the Admiral’s side, as could not but influence Sir Walter…. (P 31)

The narrator, or more precisely Austen, gives Admiral Croft substantial charisma, which foils Sir Walter’s own character, going so far as to imagine Sir Walter and Elizabeth as suffocating brightness and sociability: “The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence, or insipid talk, to meet the heartless elegance of [Anne’s] father and sister” (P 182). Furthermore, Admiral Croft loves his wife and does not desire to be separated from her. During a dinner with the Musgroves, the in-laws of Mary, Anne’s younger sister, Admiral Croft says to Mrs. Croft at the table for all to hear: “When he [Captain Wentworth] is married, if we have the good luck to live to another war, we shall see him do as you and I, and a great many others, have done. We shall have him very thankful to any body that will bring him his wife” (P 60). Admiral Croft appears to admonish Captain Wentworth’s disregard for the emotional attachment that can grow between a man and a woman pointing out that Captain Wentworth is single and has not found his better half, or rather, his equal. Furthermore, Mrs. Croft scolds her brother’s mistaken opinion that women can never equal sailors in terms of hardiness or loyalty and should remain off ships: “My dear Frederick, you are talking quite idly. Pray what would become of us poor sailors’ wives, who often want to be conveyed to one port or another, after our husbands, if every body had your feelings?” (P 60). Mrs. Croft can hold her own when she is aboard ship with her husband and claims men like her brother cause more harm than good in attempting to preserve women from sailing due to perceived fragility or loss of femininity; women can equally withstand rough seas so long as their husbands permit that equality to exist. Austen shows that a great share of the responsibility to foster equality rests with the husband. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously by Porter,
women still did not enjoy equal privileges within society at large: “Above all, women span, kept house, and raised children,” (84) but could be afforded more equal positions within marriages by their husbands. This explains Mrs. Croft’s outburst against her brother’s belief that women are not equal to men on the sea because Captain Wentworth is not disposed share his privileges with his hypothetical wife, creating an unequal marriage, which his sister can clearly see. Admiral and Mrs. Croft share their dedication to each other and their union; they have created a space where equality exists and thus their marriage flourishes.

Of course, a wife could try to seize power away from her husband, creating a constant tug-of-war, as seen in Charles and Mary Musgrove’s marriage. Their marriage, similar to Sir and Lady Elliot’s marriage, is not necessarily a disaster but it does paint a picture of a union filled with friction because Charles and Mary do not see eye to eye. Each offers opportunity for Austen to present the negative stereotypes of husband and wife within the lower ranks of the landed gentry: “the importance assigned to class distinction is the source of much of her comedy and her irony, as of her social satire” (McMaster 125). The union of the Musgroves of Uppercross Cottage is arguably a socioeconomically sound one. Charles Musgrove is the eldest son of an esquire and will inherit the whole of Uppercross while Mary Elliot is the youngest daughter of a baronet; both are technically from the same social rank although snobby Mary, her father, and Elizabeth may believe the Elliots of superior station. Porter notes that these apparent inconsequential differences were what defined English society:

The English social ladder was indeed precisely graded. The distinctions between being a servant in or out of livery, a kitchen maid or a lady’s maid, below or above the salt, lower deck or quarterdeck in the navy, between being called Mrs. or Madam, were delicate, but
they mattered at their own levels of creating status differentiation no less than the pecking-order between baronets and earls, marquises and dukes…. (49)

With this in mind, Mary appears justified somewhat in her compulsion to judge individuals based on their social rank and in her constant attempts to wrest control of the Musgroves’s socioeconomic plans from Charles. Charles may not be as judgmental as his wife, but he too thinks of how to better his family: “Good, freehold property. No, no; Henrietta might do worse than marry Charles Hayter” (P 66). On the surface, husband and wife appear to be of similar mindset albeit with varying levels of ambition, yet they disagree on the trivial details which cause substantial division: “[I]t would be shocking to have Henrietta marry Charles Hayter; a very bad thing for her, and still worse for me” (P 66), says Mary. They do share the general opinion of what would best serve their family, such as the Musgrove sisters marrying well, but Charles and Mary have very different designs on how such a conclusion should be reached. Neither one appears to be open to compromise since each individual appears to force the other into concession by brute will. Charles does so when he decides to go to dinner at the great house without Mary or her approval when their son is injured and Mary likewise forces Charles to take Anne back to Uppercross instead of herself when the group is at Lyme. Mary’s plans, when successful, validate her own voice in an unequal society but pursuing them would completely silence her husband’s voice and desires, causing pushback from Charles, again provoking Mary to react, and on the cycle continues leaving neither’s voice completely validated. Mary and Charles are not equals where their marriage space is concerned.

Although Mary and Charles’s marriage is presented as a disappointing one, theirs does not compare to the worst example of a union presented by Austen: Mr. Elliot’s first marriage. The narrator hints at a marriage of disproportionate backgrounds between Mr. Elliot and the late
Mrs. Elliot: “Instead of pushing his fortune in the line marked out for the heir of the house of Elliot, he had purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth” (P 13). At first glance, Mr. Elliot appears to be acting in a way that would secure his felicity in marriage by way of economic security; she has the money and he has the title. Again, Porter points out that a situation like Mr. and Mrs. Elliott’s situation was common during the regency: “It was the alliance of a gentleman’s son with a merchant’s daughter, the landed embracing the loaded, that was marriage à la mode” (52). The narrator and Austen do not appear to judge Mr. Elliot’s union to a woman of socially inferior birth for her dowry per se, but as previously seen in Emma and Pride and Prejudice, Austen does not favor unions that are solely made as business transactions. Mr. Elton and Mr. Collins are both somewhat mocked for their prospecting (albeit excusable for their stations) within their respective novels and each man’s misguided proposal brings Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet emotional distress. Curiously, Mrs. Smith shrugs off Anne’s surprise at Mr. Elliot’s marriage made entirely based on wealth: “Oh! those things are too common. When one lives in the world, a man or woman’s marrying for money is too common to strike one as it ought” (P 162). Through Mrs. Smith, whom Anne and the narrator had previously praised as a noble character, Austen does appear to present a somewhat blasé attitude towards business unions but what Austen shows through Mrs. Smith is that she is aware of societal expectations and pressures that may push individuals to marry solely for socioeconomic reasons without their emotional wellbeing taken into consideration and therefore do not pass cutting judgment upon these individuals. These unions should create shock according to Mrs. Smith but because they are so commonplace society has become desensitized towards them. Despite this, Mr. Elliot does not receive parodying rebuke or faint acquittal as Mr. Elton and Mr. Collins do because Mr. Elliot acts very unscrupulously towards his wife as
relayed by Mrs. Smith to Anne: “Mr. Elliot … had one objective in view—to make his fortune, and by a rather quicker process than the law. He was determined to make it by marriage. All his caution was spent in being secured of the real amount of her [late Mrs. Elliot] fortune, before he committed himself” (P 161-163). Mr. Elliot does not care for the woman; he cares for her money and status, nothing else, as witnessed when he completely withdraws from Anne and the other Elliots once Anne’s engagement to Captain Wentworth became public. Had Mr. Elliot truly changed and valued the connection to the Kellynch Elliots, he would have continued the relationship with Anne and her family after her announcement of marriage. Since there is nothing for Mr. Elliot to gain monetarily, he leaves her society.

In contrast, although both clergymen from Pride and Prejudice and Emma marry for socioeconomic reasons and not for emotional ones, they appear to have some emotional attachment to their wives. Mr. Collins shows excitement for his upcoming wedding: “After a week spent in professions of love and schemes of felicity, Mr. Collins was called from his amiable Charlotte by the arrival of Saturday” (PP 107). Likewise, Mr. Elton visibly recovers his disposition upon returning to Highbury with Mrs. Elton: “Mr. Elton returned, a very happy man. He had gone away rejected and mortified—disappointed in a very sanguine hope…. He came back gay and self-satisfied, eager and busy, caring nothing for Miss Woodhouse, and defying Miss Smith” (E 142). Both men may have chosen their respective partners based on money and status, but both Charlotte and Augusta also appear to enjoy a certain level of autonomy and self-expression within their respective marriages. The women are not made any less than they were before they were married; on the contrary, both women appear content in their situation: “Elizabeth in the solitude of her chamber had to meditate upon Charlotte’s degree of contentment,” (PP 122) and Mrs. Elton’s proclaims that: “Ah! there is nothing like staying at
home, for real comfort. Nobody can be more devoted to home than I am” (E 214). In both instances, each individual appeared to enter into the union freely and with full knowledge of the purpose of the marriage. The women may not be respected as an equal by their husbands but the women attained socioeconomic stability and a comfortable situation which was the goal as Charlotte openly states: “I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (PP 96). This is not to say that Austen fully endorses these types of marriages, but rather that she does not condemn them totally because both parties are in agreement about positions and power within the union. At best these unions may grow to be like the Crofts or Harvilles, with both spouses sharing equally the marriage space, but at worst they may end up like the Mr. Elliot’s marriage, with constant bickering or disregard for one another’s wants and boundaries ending in misery.

All of these unions presented as typical for the time are counterposed by the naval officers, Captains Wentworth, Benwick, and Harville, and Admiral Croft, who serve as positive examples and role models (albeit Benwick and Wentworth grow into their roles throughout the narrative), not just for middle-class men but for peers as well. Austen greatly praises “that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (P 203). None of the navy marriages presented in the novel have any of the negative traits that Austen has criticized. These men hold virtue in both moral and socioeconomic terms as seen through their greater awareness of sentiments as Captain Harville says: “I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings, capable of bearing the most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather,” (P 187) and of their responsible handling of finances: “Captain
Harville had taken his present house for half a year … his fortune all directing him to a residence unexpensive” (P 82). The captains know how to express their inner sentiments all the while having social awareness of the person listening to the sentiments; Captain Harville may completely disagree with Anne but he does not silence her voice or insult her as opposed to Mr. Darcy who infuriates Elizabeth when he expresses his sentiments. Alice Drum theorizes that Austen’s literary favoritism of the navy stems from her personal life: “Since two of Jane Austen’s brothers were naval officers, who eventually became admirals, it is hardly surprising that Austen paints a far more favorable portrait of the naval than army officers” (108).

Christopher Clausen also notices that: “Frederick Wentworth is the only Jane Austen hero who lifts a finger to better his position in life, as well as the only one whose parents we hear no more than that they are dead” (93). Captain Wentworth’s success is earned, not inherited, further celebrating his merits, compared to Mr. Darcy’s and Mr. Knightley’s responsible, dutiful stewardship of their already inherited estates. Furthermore, Drum believes that Austen is simply responding and evolving with the changes occurring within England and its gentry by creating her later male heroes as members of the professions growing in prestige: “Jane Austen is a balanced social critic, who is able to promote the positive values of traditional gentry life, while showing at the same time and in the same novels that gentry life is evolving—and not necessarily for the worse” (93). Sir Walter is an example of how the peerage viewed these new rising individuals when Mr. Shepherd needs to convince him that a navy tenant is perfectly appropriate for Kellynch: “This peace will be turning our rich Navy Officers ashore. Many a noble fortune has been made during the war. I presume to observe, Sir Walter, that, in the way of business, gentlemen of the navy are well to deal with” (P 20). Austen is very much aware of the changes occurring within the wealthy classes of England, “Unlike the landed estates, the Royal Navy
requires no dynastic continuity” (Claussen 93), and she accordingly uses language like “noble fortune” to equate inherited money with earned money to further justify the virtues of the navy within the novel to further her agenda of persuasion. She is using the new rhetoric as well as the socioeconomic realities of her present to further strengthen her argument.

The novel’s pivotal moment regarding its rhetoric and social awareness occurs when Captain Wentworth is persuaded by Anne’s conversation with Captain Harville to write down his sentiments renewing his desire to marry Anne. Curiously, Captain Wentworth’s inner revelation of emotions is put down on paper while Anne is in the same room with him. This contrasts both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightley’s direct address to their respective female admirers. The reason for Austen having Captain Wentworth write his emotions first before addressing Anne directly is to redress the comment Anne makes to Captain Harville about prose: “Yes, yes, if you please, no references to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story” (P 188). Ironically, Anne becomes persuaded through a man’s writing that Captain Wentworth still loves her after eight years despite her belief that men sooner forget their sentiments through their work and career. Yet at the same time, the reason Captain Harville and Anne are having this debate is because Captain Benwick has recovered from the grief of the death of his fiancée and proposed to Luisa Musgrove less than a year later. Austen reveals, or rather states the obvious, that sentiments are a complex topic and that the relationships men and women have cannot be categorized and judged as easily as books. Captain Harville and Anne cannot come to an agreement because there is no universal agreement on the sexes, regardless of what writers or rhetoricians may argue. Austen is very much aware of this and writes numerous character differences between individuals of the same sex as seen with comparisons between Anne and her two sisters, for instance. In the introduction to the novel, Deidre Shauna Lynch addresses this
“climax of the novel” (xxviii) and says that: “This is not the final verdict *Persuasion* delivers on what books do to and for readers. Austen has Anne’s and Harville’s debate about constancy conclude in a draw, she begins the next chapter hinting that she’s uncertain whether the story she’s told is ‘bad morality’” (xxix). This bad morality refers to Austen’s ability of answering the debate about which of the sexes feels stronger or longer: Austen has no answer to give the reader, hence a “bad morality.” Yet Austen’s goal in the novel was not to answer this question but to persuade her audience that regardless of whether the man or woman has stronger or more brief sentiments is insignificant to the real issue of having equality within the union for both sexes. If both partners have their socioeconomic needs met, then the lack of strong sentiments later in the union will not deter the possibility of the individual/s living a comfortable life. This is most exemplified with Sir Walter and Lady Elliot’s marriage; their honeymoon period may have ended but because their marriage had been made with socioeconomic responsibilities in mind as well as some sentimental attachment, their marriage did not crumble and both were able to lead relatively content and comfortable lives regardless of their level of emotions to each other. Sir Walter endured Lady Elliot’s prudent financial planning for the estate and she in turn tolerated his personal vanities.

Critic Stuart Curran places great weight on the scene where Captain Harville and Anne discuss literature and the lessons literature teaches regarding gender: “Coming very near the end of Austen’s last novel, this sharp observation on the gender biases inherent in literary discourse has often been taken as a characteristically oblique expression of her feminism as well as a defense of her singular craft” (169). Austen sees an impasse in having her voice heard as a woman writer within the literary sphere and overcomes this by pushing *Persuasion* to straddle the line between a domestic novel and a rhetorician’s morality tale discussing men and women’s
equality rights. On the domestic novel side, Austen would have been among many of her sex: “Women writers in England of the Restoration and early eighteenth century, for the most part, divided along the lines of class and morality” (Curran 170); however, Austen also interjects at the novel’s final chapter a strong rhetorical appeal:

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so likely to be necessary to each other’s ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth; and if such parties succeed, how should a Captain Wentworth and an Anne Elliot, with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them, fail of bearing down any opposition? (P 199)

If *Persuasion* is to be categorized as a work centered around using the new rhetoric to convince readers the value and importance of marriage equality, then it only seems expected that the author of this morality tale should include closing comments. In the “closing comment” Austen prompts readers to recall if they have encountered young people that decided to marry regardless of socioeconomic appropriateness or sentimental suitability. In these cases, she asks if these marriages failed when both the man and woman entered into the union freely and willingly of their own choosing. The marriages that Anne encounters where both individuals did enter marriage freely and willingly—such as the Musgroves, Mrs. Smith’s former marriage, and even Anne’s own parents’ marriage—all had some form of stability (albeit some were left wanting in other areas). Austen then asks rhetorically how much more of a guarantee do Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth have for strong and happy marriage emotionally and socioeconomically? Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot hold equally strong sentiments for their union to take place
on top of the fact that he has a large independent fortune to use at will and she has familial ties and connections within the peerage; both socioeconomic needs and sentimental needs have been met. Their domestic felicity will be distinguished.

The novels of *Persuasion*, *Emma*, and *Pride and Prejudice* all have characters that run the gamut on personality and integrity. Through these characters Jane Austen guides the reader to see and learn which actions specifically Austen sees as reprimandable and which she believes are virtuous. Austen’s overarching goal is to show that she believes equality in marriage is the most important aspect for creating a successful union between a man and a woman. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen uses Mr. Darcy’s first proposal of marriage to call attention to the mixed messages that men like Mr. Darcy received from society and from literature. His first proposal fails because he attempts to follow a romantic approach popularized by books of the time, yet he still worries and tries to abate the socioeconomic responsibilities that are placed upon him. Through financial growth on Elizabeth Bennet’s side and emotional growth on Mr. Darcy’s side, they mature to become closer matched than when he first proposed, thus laying the groundwork for a marriage of equality. Likewise, in *Emma*, Emma grows emotionally to better understand the sentiments of those around her and come closer to Mr. Knightley’s level of understanding; their marriage is of equals in property and sentiments. Austen also uses Emma’s other suitors, Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill, to further explore how equality in marriage would look in the lower echelons of the gentry. Finally, Austen writes *Persuasion* with rhetorical purpose to create a work that seeks to convince the reader of the importance of equality in marriage. She uses multiple examples from different socioeconomic backgrounds including individuals of the rising new middle class such as Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft to pursue this purpose. Anne Elliot, daughter of a baronetage, and newly affluent Captain Wentworth stand as the ultimate
example of a marriage made between equals because both have the maturity of age, good socioeconomic standing, and full affection for each other. Each of Austen’s heroines and their respective heroes enter marriage as equals. Through equality, their marriages will meet their wants of a good spouse as will their society enjoy and witness perfect happiness in the unions; that is a good moral to end with.


Drum, Alice. “Pride and Prestige: Jane Austen and the Professions”. *College Literature*, The


